

Brown Camps

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The following is an excerpt from *Binge Crazy: A Psychotherapist's Memoir of Food Addiction, Mental Illness, Obesity and Recovery*, Arrow Publications, LLC, 2015.

Brown Camps was a private residential facility for emotionally disturbed children, founded in 1966 by John L. Brown after he left Warrendale,²⁴ a conflict-ridden government-sponsored children's mental- health treatment centre. An old camp counsellor friend, Jerry, had suggested I apply to work at Brown's and that I'd be great with these kids. But my memories and the hospital records both confirm that I was already over the edge when I applied for a job there in the first or second week of March 1967, only a few weeks before I entered the Clarke.

At that time, Brown's offered a revolutionary and controversial treatment program. Staff members were trained to restrain wild and unruly kids with their own bodies, “holding” and enclosing them on the floor in a safe way. The kids could then yell and scream without hurting themselves and without artificial constraints, such as drugs or straitjackets. I'd heard that the holding technique built trust.²⁵

In the mid-to-late 1960s, therapeutic intervention involving human touch was in the early experimental stages and considered highly questionable. But I sometimes wonder what would have happened to me if I'd simply been held my first night at the Clarke, whether drugs would have been needed.

My initial interview for the Brown Camps job was conducted by Dr. F at his office in the northern outskirts of Toronto – in an area called Oak Ridges, now part of Richmond Hill – but accessible by public transit. The Clarke records show his real name, but I prefer the letter “F” for his capital-F Failure to detect my slipping grip on reality. A rather heavy-set older man in a tweed jacket, Dr. F said very little, in typical psychiatrist fashion. At the far end of his large office, I couldn't help but notice that a luncheon buffet had been set up, with plates of food arranged attractively on the table. I wondered if it was some sort of test just for me as I pondered whether to choose the celery or carrot sticks, the fruit, the sandwiches, or the pastry. I thought it strange they'd know this weakness of mine ahead of time, but didn't pursue this line of thinking to its obvious rational conclusion that indeed, they did not.

Instead, I just sat there, resisting the temptation to sample some of the food, which was becoming quite a distraction. What was really going on here? Of course, I mentioned none of my suspicions to the doctor. I wasn't going to risk talking about food unless he mentioned it first. Since he ignored it, I pretended to do the same. I don't recall much of the interview, but I must have passed muster, because Dr. F arranged for me to meet a man named David V at the camp residence, a few blocks away. Since it was a beautiful sunny day, I didn't mind walking, although I felt quite nervous and apprehensive. I was meeting another David.

If you're feeling a bit confused about the Davids, imagine how it must have been for me, in my less-than-together state of mind.

As it turned out, David V was a very tall, attractive man, who essentially ran the place. After an informal chat in his ground-floor corner office, he took me on a tour of the facilities.

Since it was midday, our first stop was the lunchroom, which was far from what I expected. Chaos reigned. Several rows of picnic-style tables and benches were filled with happy, noisy, energetic kids, jumping up and down, waving their arms about, shrieking at one another, and laughing as they grabbed food off each other's plates. Boisterous adults at each table made little effort to calm them down. Shirley definitely would not have approved.

Was I hungry? David V asked. Would I like some lunch? No thanks. I wondered if this was yet another food-related test. Temptation loomed its ugly head, despite the chaotic atmosphere. But I would never eat in front of a potential employer, or anyone, for that matter.

He then escorted me outside to see the grounds and the home from a different perspective. The snow had melted all around, leaving enormous puddles and oodles of mud in the driveway and parking area behind the building.

Enviously, I watched some of the kids play in the puddles. Splashing, jumping, sinking into the mud, oblivious to the mess they were making or how dirty they were getting. Their freedom, their joyful abandon, struck me profoundly. How much I wanted to splash in the puddles with them and sink into that mud. I longed to know how it felt to slide

deep into the ooze. I even mentioned this to David V, who shrugged and said I could join them if I wanted.

No. I couldn't. I wasn't dressed for it. My best black wool coat with the fur-trimmed collar, and my dark royal-blue, double-knit, three-piece suit (a tight skirt, shell top, and three-quarter-length, double-breasted jacket with gold buttons down the front) was not how you'd dress to jump anywhere, let alone into mud. With such an outfit, I also had to wear several girdles, to keep the fat from squeezing out. With midriff, tummy, hips, and thighs so restrained, plus suspenders and nylon stockings, submerging myself into the mud with abandon was not something I was physically capable of doing. Of course, my clothes were really just an excuse. Even if I'd been wearing loose clothes and rubber boots, psychologically I was nowhere near free enough to play. My un-met desire to do so made me feel uncomfortable, so I pushed it away.

David V and I returned inside to attend the daily staff meeting. There, my attention focused on everyone's peculiar idiosyncrasies. As we all sat in a circle in the staff lounge area, what I observed were all the gestures, mannerisms, and movements the staff made – the nose-scratching, eye-rubbing, earlobe-tugging, lip-licking, leg-stretching, leg-crossing, arm-crossing, finger-tapping, and so on.

From my current perspective, these seem to be normal movements people make while sitting together casually and comfortably. But at the time, my perception had somehow shifted into slow motion, as if a camera had zoomed in to show close-ups of moving body parts in a choreographed dance. Viewed this way, these people seemed weird. I wondered what was wrong with them and if they were okay enough to look after emotionally disturbed children.

When the staff meeting finished, I expressed my concerns back in David V's office. He seemed surprised by my comments and not too impressed with my keen powers of observation. After a while, he told me I wasn't really suitable to work at Brown Camps and escorted me to the spacious front hall to bid me goodbye. But I didn't want to leave. I wanted to stay and persuade him that I was an excellent candidate.

I'm not clear exactly how it happened, but let's just say he noticed my reluctance to go. As he took my arm at the elbow to lead me closer to the door, I resisted and pulled away. But the more I physically resisted, the more insistent he became that I leave.

Other staff members soon arrived on the scene, some taking hold of my arms to move me out of the hallway. I recall sinking to the floor, at first saying I didn't want to go, then yelling "No!" And then at the top of my lungs, "Don't make me go!" The staff and David V grabbed me by the arms and lifted me up, as I kicked and struggled to get free. In the end, four of them had to physically carry me out of the building, like a sack of potatoes.

On the front verandah, David V waited with me as I gathered myself together. He told me I couldn't stay at the home and said if I wanted help, he'd give me the number of someone to call. Yes. Help would be good, yes. So while I waited outside, shocked at my own behaviour, he went back to his office and returned in a few moments with the phone number of someone he vouched for. This is how I got Gilda's number at the Clarke.

After my humiliating eviction, I remember walking along the gravel-coated roadside, clutching the phone number, this lifeline, in my pocket, mulling over the phrase "want help." I'm now incredibly grateful for that help. Without that number and the assurance that I'd like Mrs. Gilda Katz, who knows what would have happened to me. I can tell you this much. I would never in a million years have thought of calling the Clarke Institute on my own. I didn't even know a place like the Clarke existed.

Everyone knew about the mental health centre at 999 Queen Street West, Toronto's official "loony bin." We all joked about it. That's where I might have ended up, with who knows what results. Several well-known Canadian authors and mental health advocates have written of their experiences²⁶ in the Canadian mental health system – which makes me realize how fortunate I was back in the 1960s. Sadly, the type of support I received is no longer available.

So a huge thank-you goes to my messenger, David V, whom I never saw again. Until you said the words "if you want help," I wasn't aware I needed any. It took several weeks before I actually got it.

When I was younger, so much younger than today, I never needed anybody's help in any way.²⁷

Here's what astounds me about my Brown Camps experience. Despite my sad and sorry mental state, I managed to fool the psychiatrist who screened me. And I also fooled David V, enough for him to show me around the place. His suspicions weren't raised till I told him mine.

Then again, I'd been fooling people my whole life. My adult act, practiced since I could talk at the age of two, was polished to near perfection. I'd learned early on that the smart way to get along was to give people what they wanted. Tell them what they wanted to hear. You'd have less trouble, and they might even like you. Problem was, I'd started to believe my own BS.

24 Film director Alan King made an award-winning film about Warrendale. Online at [http:// www.rogerebert.com/reviews/warrendale-1969](http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/warrendale-1969) ; and <http://www.browndale.net/id86.html> .

25 “Good controls for children,” by Carol Dukoff. Brown Camps turned into Browndale. Online at <http://www.browndale.net/id47.html> .

26 Three names in particular come to mind: Pat Capponi, Geoffrey Reaume, and David Reville. All have advocated for psychiatric survivors.

Capponi, in 1992, published *Upstairs in the Crazy House: The Life of a Psychiatric Survivor*. The book tells of her three-month stay on a hospital psychiatric ward, after which she was sent to room in a boarding house for the mentally ill, which she and others got closed down several years later. Now she successfully writes mystery novels. http://www.quillandquire.com/authors/profile.cfm?article_id=7114 .

Reaume, an Associate Professor at York University (an admitted schizophrenic), has published 3 books since 2000 (most notably *Remembrance of patients past: patient life at the Toronto Hospital for the Insane, 1870-1940*) and co-founded the Psychiatric Survivor Archives in Toronto.

<http://www.mindfreedom.org/campaign/media/radio/mfradio/show/geoffrey-reaume>

Reville was in 3 mental hospitals in the 1960s, but ultimately got elected as a Toronto Councillor and an MPP in Ontario (he has contributed to *Mental illness and pathways into homelessness: annotated bibliography* 1997). Both Reaume and Reville teach “Mad People's History” at university (Reaume at York and Reville at Ryerson).

<http://www.ryerson.ca/ds/for-faculty/index.html#Reville> .

27 “Help,” written by John Lennon and Paul McCartney, was from the Beatles' 1965 album of the same name released by Parlophone Records, and used to be part of my musical repertoire. BMI does not identify the publisher. Online at <http://repertoire.bmi.com/Title.asp?blnWriter=true&blnPublisher=true&blnArtist=true&page=1&keyid=554585&ShowNbr=0&ShowSeqNbr=0&querytype=WorkID> and www.discogs.com/Beatles-Help/master/45895 .